

BRITISH ARCHITECTS.



THE family from which Sir Wm. Chambers descended was of good standing and estate at Rippoon, in Yorkshire. His father, a merchant, having claims upon the Swedish government, which required time and perseverance to bring to a satisfactory termination, removed with his household to Stockholm, where the subject of this sketch first drew breath about the year 1725. Though not British born, his origin and the professional eminence he attained will doubtless be received as valid grounds for classing him with those distinguished "BRITISH ARCHITECTS" whose efforts and success afford examples worthy of emulation by a considerable portion of our readers.

We find the future architect at the early age of seventeen engaged as supercargo of a ship, freighted by the Swedish East-India Company, and in this capacity he visited various settlements in the Eastern Hemisphere.

At Canton, during a protracted stay, he not only discharged the immediate duties of his station, but, availing himself of some proclivity in drawing, found leisure to make sketches of whatever occurred to him as interesting in the Chinese style of building and gardening. A hundred years since, that country and its peculiarities had scarcely been described; little of graphic illustration existed beyond the grotesque representation of native painters, on the exportable wares of China, a death which young Chambers ventured in some measure to supply by publishing, on his return to England, a set of well-executed engravings from his original sketches. This step, though there may be nothing about it beyond the venture of offering novelties for sale at a remunerating price, laid the foundation of his future fortune. It must be presumed that, about this time, his skillfulness as a draughtsman gave him a taste for architecture, for in his twenty-second year, finally abandoning commercial pursuits, he passed over to Italy, and employed himself in studying the science, not only by measuring and drawing the more ancient works of art, but those productions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which are distinguished as those of the revival. At Paris, also, he became acquainted with all the works of celebrity in that capital, studied under Clerisseno, and under him, it is said, acquired a freedom of pencil in which few excelled him. Thus prepared, he ultimately set himself down in Russell-street, Covent-garden, to await a call for the exertion of his talents; not rich, having nothing beyond the consciousness of these acquisitions, and the casual interest of a brother architect, Chambers had, however, discretion, a thorough knowledge of the world, and, says Allan Cunningham, "a certain agreeable and winning way, which assisted him in the pursuit of notice and patronage." At this juncture, the Earl of Bute deemed it advisable to select a tutor in architecture (C) for the Prince of Wales, afterwards George the Third, and Mr. Carr, of York, being consulted, strongly recommended Chambers, as not only skilful, but well qualified in conversation and manners; these points being ascertained by the Earl in a personal interview, he was forthwith introduced to the Prince, who became so much attached to him, that, on his accession to the throne, he appointed him Royal Architect; the Chinese examples now absorbed the royal mind, the taste of the professor being exercised in realizing them in the grounds of Kew Palace; and here commenced, if not the royal road to science, at any rate, that to the office of Surveyor-General of Works.

The tutelage of the prince having expired, Mr. Chambers, now Sir William, by virtue of the dignity of a Knight of the Polar Star, conferred by the King of Sweden, and confirmed by the special license of his own sovereign, was at liberty to undertake commissions of a general kind; of this description were the villa of Lord Beborough, at Roehampton, and the more magnificent mansion of Lord Abercorn, at Duddingston, near Edinburgh, which may be deemed the most successful of his works; out of the immediate circle of court

influence, he was rather unfortunate than otherwise, and frequently met competitors of at least equal ability. In the competition for the building of Blackfriars Bridge, he was defeated by Myles; and in that for Clarendon, the mansion of Lord Clive, at Esler, by Browne; these are prominent cases, but others of a minor nature might be adduced. As holding the highest public rank in the profession, and entrusted with almost unlimited means of embodying his conceptions in some one or more memorials of one and importance, in a national sense; we can refer but to a solitary example—Somerset House. This building, familiar to a large number of our readers, is situated on the river bank, and in a favourable position for being viewed from Waterloo Bridge, or in passing up or down the Thames. The front towards the Strand is seen to disadvantage, from being in a line with the houses. The river front has always appeared to me deficient in that degree of majesty the site and means at the disposal of the architect might have commanded; the disproportioned height of the basement takes away from the effect of the order adopted; and, in the numerous dark recesses, the columns appear diminutive or dwarfish; the nearer view from the Strand increases the effect of an undue height of the basement, and upon the whole the impression conveyed by the exterior, is that of a crowded and laboured effort at grandeur. The square of this building, comprising an area of 300 feet north and south, and 200 feet east and west, is entirely from Sir W. Chambers' designs, and was executed under his personal direction. It presents a fatiguing repetition of rustic work, but there are many fine door-cases and windows, and several specimens of sculpture worthy of inspection. The interior is arranged with much care, and we should say, judicious appropriation of space. The staircases are also well placed, and upon a commanding scale.

Apart from the Chinese toys of his early years, the bent of Chambers' mind was steady and persevering; his mature views led him to bestow all his energies upon the Roman style, which he cultivated with care and fondness, but without manifestation of original genius. His "Treatise on Civil Architecture," is a work of laborious research, compiled under the most favourable circumstances a professional man could enjoy. He there calls upon all who aspire to distinction to study the principles adhered to by the Italian artists, and, consistently, affords reference to the purest of their works. Prejudices and preferences, however, beset the greatest men, and our author was by no means an exception, yet his book may be consulted with advantage, and is, in truth, the most valuable legacy he has bequeathed. Will it be believed by those who may not have looked closely into the opinions and works of our public professional men that Chambers, who, though he had not "trod the classic ground of Attica, or visited the older monuments of Sicily and Postum," lived in the days of Le Rot and Stuart, yet prided himself in an affectation of utter ignorance of Grecian architecture, disputing both its perfection, or that it had ever been practised upon a vast and magnificent scale by the people of that country?

In 1763, Sir W. Chambers was mainly instrumental in procuring the great benefit conferred upon the arts by the establishment of the ROYAL ACADEMY, in which end his personal influence with George the Third was successfully urged; of this institution he was the first treasurer, which office he continued to hold, with every advantage in its progress, during his life. In private life he was universally respected; the sunshine of royalty warmed, but did not spoil, the prudent man; his familiar circle embraced all of note in the scientific and literary world, among which may be enumerated Dr. Johnson, Goldsmith, Garrick, Burney, Sir J. Reynolds, and many other celebrated characters.

Few men are destined to experience the entire good fortune that fell to the lot of Sir William Chambers, and which extended to the whole of his immediate descendants, all his children having married into families both wealthy and above the rank of their progenitors. He died full of years, on the 8th of May, 1796, and was honoured with a final resting-place in Westminster Abbey.

ANCIENT PAINTINGS IN CHURCHES.

THE celebrated and highly interesting Norman church of St. Werburgh, Castor, in Northamptonshire, has been lately under restoration. Here, also, a large portion of fresco painting, in very fair preservation, has been discovered on the north-west wall of the north aisle. It consists of three subjects (probably passages in the life of some saint), each below the other, and under wide and low ogee canopies of the same form and size. On the west side of each of these canopies, is a smaller and narrower canopy or niche, containing a female figure erect. The form of the canopies, and the ground being sense of fleur-de-lis, a common ornament of the fifteenth century, render it probable, in the absence of any definite mark in the costume of the numerous figures, that the painting is not earlier than 1400. The lowest subject is the passion of St. Catherine, who stands with her hands bound behind her back, between two wheels, each of which is turned by a man, while an angel above with a sword in each hand is striking the wheels. One of the executioners appears to be tearing away his head in awe; on the ground sits a man with a drawn sword superintending the martyrdom. In the smaller canopy, St. Catherine is being led bound to the spot. The middle series exhibits a man bearing a woman over his shoulder, and holding her by the head, ready to throw her into a cave or den, in which a crowd of persons are seen, one a prominent figure in white, either dead or leaning backwards. One woman has buried her face in her hands. On the ground sits a man pointing with his extended finger to the cave. The smaller canopy contains a female effigy, holding in her hand something like a basket; the highest series, which is just below the cornice of the roof, exhibits a castle or church, from which a procession appears to be issuing forth. In advance is a figure, apparently of a knight (if so, the armour dates about 1430, but it is confused and indistinct), grappling with or carrying away another figure.

Partial restorations have also brought to light some paintings on the eastern wall of the north aisle at St. Stephen's, Elton, Northamptonshire. These are highly curious, and for their great antiquity and excellence of execution would be perhaps among the finest specimens extant, were they to tolerate preservation; but they are greatly mutilated and partially effaced in the process of uncovering them. The subject appears to be the Blem of Jesse; two oak boughs interlace each other in a series of oval loops (each about two feet long by one and a half wide), in the manner of the figure 8. In each loop a figure is seated across a bough, while on other boughs or twigs, at the sides, a series of figures, one above the other, are standing. Green leaves terminate every twig, and are relieved by a ground smelted of clusters of six red spots. Every figure has by his side an inscription, of which only two or three letters are here and there legible. One of the highest loops is filled by a black-letter inscription, manifestly of subsequent date, since the earlier painting remains perfect below it. The lowest loop to the north contains a figure of King David playing the harp. The drapery, faces, and limbs are very finely painted. The form of the letters, and of the crowns on several of the figures, as well as the general style of the painting, enable us to refer this very curious work to the age of Henry III., when the church was probably built. It evidently formed the decoration round a chantry altar.

Three frescoes, and that lately found at St. Andrew's, Impington, Cambridgeshire, go far to confirm the opinion we have always entertained, and more than once expressed, that this kind of pictorial and didactic embellishment was formerly general even to our smallest and humblest village churches. That frescoes should hitherto have been so recklessly destroyed in every case as soon as discovered, is as a matter of surprise as well as regret. We can see no objection generally to restoring and retaining them where they occur. We hope indeed that the time is not far distant when the foolish prejudice against fresco paintings in churches shall be entirely removed. Very recently equally strong dislike was felt against stained glass. This has now nearly vanished away, and we hope that its appropriate and necessary accompaniment, painting on walls and roof, will speedily be revived also.